

Taming the Dragon

a novel

Dan Armstrong

iUniverse, Inc.
New York Lincoln Shanghai

Taming the Dragon

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1-800-Authors (1-800-288-4677)

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, names, incidents, organizations, and dialogue in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

ISBN-13: 978-0-595-42125-1 (pbk)

ISBN-13: 978-0-595-86465-2 (ebk)

ISBN-10: 0-595-42125-3 (pbk)

ISBN-10: 0-595-86465-1 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

C H A P T E R 1

“What a fiasco! The world’s largest dam. Ha! The Chinese are out of their minds.” The middle-aged American at the bar waved his empty glass contemptuously at the Filipino bartender.

“But they’ve paid us well,” said a second American, sitting beside the first. “Who cares what becomes of that monstrosity when it’s done?”

Both men were many drinks into the evening and showing it with little concern. It was late and there were a lot of Americans drinking in excess in this pagoda-shaped lounge perched high atop the Singapore Marriott.

“Christ! Will either of us be alive when the bitch is done?”

“If it is ever completely done! What a fucking joke.” The two men guffawed freely, making a scene and enjoying the hell out of it.

Two seats around the circular bar that formed the hub of the octagonal lounge sat a twenty-five-year-old German. Hans Fruehauf had been nursing a single beer for almost thirty minutes now, keeping a close eye on the Americans and taking in the spectacular view thirty-four floors above the shimmering streets of Asia’s richest city. The eight exterior walls of the luxurious lounge were plate glass, and from his seat, Hans looked out on Singapore’s huge international harbor at the tip of the Malay Peninsula, dotted here and there with the red and white beacons of freighters from all over the world. The setting was breathtaking and thrilling to the young German, a crystalline moment that seemed to punctuate the beginning of his professional career.

Hans had received a doctorate in hydrologic engineering and geology from the University of Dresden six months earlier. Because he also had a minor in Sinology, Germany's powerful financial export bank Hermes-Bauermann had hired him as technical advisor for their investments in Asia.

Out of Europe for the first time in his life, Hans arrived in Singapore Friday morning after fourteen hours of air travel from Berlin. He was staying at the Marriott for the weekend and had ascended to the top floor lounge this Saturday night for a beer and a glimpse of the international business set that came to English-speaking Singapore for a break from third world Asia.

Fluent in English, capable in Mandarin, Hans found it difficult to ignore the two loud Americans at the bar. Their steadily accelerating attack on the high wall dam being built in the Xiling Gorge of the Yangtze River both intrigued and unsettled him. Hans would be flying to China the next day to assess completion of that very dam for his new employer. He'd done some research of his own, and his feelings about the dam were quite different than those expressed by the Americans.

Though usually a very reserved man who kept to himself, Hans couldn't resist entering into conversation with the two Americans. "If I may interject," he said without being heard. "If I may interject," he said again, a little louder.

The two men turned to him more surprised at his manners than his interruption. Hans smiled in his very open way. "I was under the impression that most of the work at the dam was completed some time ago." With his rimless eyeglasses and short red, razor-cut hair, he looked more like an academic than a professional. "All that remains are some minor details and the construction cleanup."

The two men gave each other a *what's-up-with-him* look, then grinning, faced the young German. The American closest to him spoke. "Some minor details—right! If the dam doesn't simply fail, my guess is the reservoir will silt up before all those minor details are worked out." He laughed rudely. "With the river as low as it is now, it's like flushing baby shit

through those expensive new generators. I think a couple of the vents are already gummed up.”

The other man joined in with the laughter.

Hans didn't know what to make of this kind of humor. “You have been there? You have insights into the dam's construction that the Chinese engineers don't?”

Again the two men exchanged the *what's-up-with-him* look. The other American answered, his tone a little softer, but authoritative—a man in his early forties talking to a man many years his junior. “I've been a consulting engineer on the project for the last five years and in that time have lost all respect for the Chinese who are supervising construction. In fact, the group of us here in Singapore this weekend is celebrating leaving that rock pit. In my eyes the dam is no more than a great lump of concrete, vastly less aesthetic and only slightly more practical than the Great Pyramid of Cheops. It's a joke and everyone from the West that is part of the project knows this.” The man received a drink from the bartender and paid for it, signaling with a nod to the tender to give the German a refill of whatever he was drinking. “By the way, my name is Tim. This here is Harry.”

Harry extended his hand with a crooked grin. “Who do we have the pleasure of corrupting?”

“Hans Fruehauf.” Hans shook Harry's hand, then Tim's, entirely aware Americans could be a wily and crazy bunch. “I'm glad to meet you.”

“Don't be,” quipped Tim. “Harry's a complete asshole, and I can't be much better as I'm willing to put up with him.”

This brought another burst of laughter from the two Americans, cut short by Harry theatrically raising his hands for quiet. “So, Hans, what's your angle on these communist freaks and their crazy dam?”

“I am with Hermes-Bauermann as advance man for the final review team. I will be going to the dam site for the first time on Monday. Most of what I know comes directly from the Chinese project reports.”

Harry chuckled. “Hermes-Bauermann. You mean you're a banker come to watch your money disappear.”

“Actually, I’m an engineer. And I am here to make sure the investment pays off.” Hans said this with more conviction than he intended. The insults were taking their toll.

“Good luck is all I can offer, Hans. Check it out. See how long it takes you to come to the same conclusion the rest of us have.”

“Hermes-Bauermann?” echoed Tim. “Didn’t they award one of the first big western loans to the Three Gorges Project? Then were immediately inundated with environmental impact reports and banner waving activists. What was it, twenty years ago?”

Harry nodded and took another slug from his drink.

Hans contained his unease and smiled. “Twenty-*two* years ago.” The bartender put a fresh beer before him. Hans lifted it to Tim and took a sip. “All kidding aside, is it that bad? Are you—how do you say it—pulling my leg?”

Harry turned around on his barstool and shouted at a table of three men nearby. “Hey, Jack, what do you think of the Three Gorges Dam?”

“You trying to ruin our night, Harry?” called back one of the men. “It will make the Aswan look like one of the Seven Wonders of the World.”

The man next to him said flatly. “On a scale of one to ten, I give it a two.”

Harry turned back to Hans. “Maybe you’re the guy that’s going to save the Orient. One good German engineer that can communicate with the slopes might be all it takes?”

Hans’ discouragement showed.

“Hey, Hans,” continued Harry. “Don’t get me wrong. Maybe I don’t know shit. Maybe the thing will work. You check it out. The real hassle is party line and administrative bullshit. I went to China excited to be part of such an important project too. But get in there real close and you’ll see it. Much of the work is sub-par. Scores of shortcuts have been taken, and there are yet many, many loose ends to tie-up. If I were working for a bank, and not on salary with Caterpillar Equipment, I’d tell my bosses to get what money they can out of the thing now and be thankful to minimize losses.” Harry lifted his glass and tossed down what remained then stared straight ahead across the bar.

“Hans,” offered Tim with a hint of warmth, trying to be easy on the younger man. “We’re all sick of it. Maybe we’ve just been here too long. We hate the food. We hate the climate. And we hate the Chinese bureaucrats. The dam just sums it all up for us. If they’d done it right, they’d have built eight cofferdams on the various tributaries upstream of the site. They could be built one at a time, making the loans smaller and easier to manage. They’d get the same amount of electricity with greater control of the flood plain and considerably less impact on the environment. Man, it’s just a huge political snow job. Hype for the largest dam in the world. The crazy dream of some ambitious party chairman who’s been dead thirty years now. Steel yourself for the worst, and maybe it won’t be so bad.”

Hans nodded and took another sip of his beer, then peered off over his shoulder to the pitch black north and the South China Sea. Some two thousand miles into the invisible distance was Mainland China and the spot in the awesome darkness where he imagined the dam to be. “*Moglichenweise ist es nicht so schlecht,*” Hans muttered to himself in German. Maybe it won’t be so bad.

C H A P T E R 2

Hans had noticed her in line boarding the plane. Judging from her clothing, the shape of her face, and her eyes, he guessed that she was Chinese. But that was beside the point. She was very beautiful. And now she was sitting across the aisle, one row back in the big 747 flying from Singapore to Shanghai.

Hans turned the page in the *Sunday Singapore Times* he'd received from the stewardess and with all the intention in the world took what he hoped would appear to be a nonchalant glance over his shoulder. Yes, she was still there. Her eyes were closed and her face looked so serene it was hard not to stare.

Hans forced his attention back to his newspaper and scanned across the headlines to a full-column story: *Huge Shortfall Projected for China's Grain Harvest*. It was a story he'd been following ever since he'd known he was coming to China. Half-heartedly he read a few paragraphs into the article. It was the first week of July, and the June rains had yet to arrive. All of Asia was dry. There was discussion of China's worst drought in sixty years. And he was headed right into the center of it.

Hans read on distractedly about concerns for winter grain reserves. The price of wheat, corn, rice, and soybeans. And mention of China's awful famine in the 1950s when thirty million Chinese starved to death behind a red wall of silence. *What a time to come to China!* He folded up the paper and unbuckled his seatbelt. He rose from his seat and turned down the

aisle past the young woman on his way to the magazine rack at the rear of the cabin to return the newspaper. As he made his way back up the aisle, he peered down on the woman, admiring her glossy black hair pulled back in a long ponytail. He noted she wore a single blue glove that matched her quilted jacket. It was on her right hand and had a red flower embroidered on it.

Hans sat down and closed his eyes, idly thinking of some way to introduce himself to the Chinese woman. He'd had a long couple of days. The cross-continental flight Thursday from Berlin. A tedious briefing at the H-B branch in Singapore on Friday. Saturday had been paper work in his hotel room and the late night visit to the Marriott lounge. Now he flew to Shanghai, connecting to Wuhan for a dinner tonight with administrators from China's National Hydrology and Biotechnology Institute. Then it was off to Sandouping on Monday and the site of the Three Gorges Dam ...

Hans woke when the pilot announced in Mandarin and English that they were starting the descent. He sat up and twisted his neck a bit, sneaking in a quick peek over his shoulder at the young Chinese woman. She was speaking in Mandarin to an older Asian woman sitting beside her. He pushed his seat back as far as it would go and tried to eavesdrop over the hum of the jet turbines.

They were speaking softly. He couldn't hear all of it. The older woman was asking typical end of flight questions. What do you do? Do you live in Shanghai? Where are you going from there? The younger woman wasn't yielding much information, but said something about Wuhan.

The stewardess interrupted. "Sir, please, put your seat up in the full forward position."

"Oh, yes, certainly," replied Hans, missing whatever more was said behind him.

Twenty minutes later, the plane landed at Shanghai's Hongqian Airport and taxied to the terminal. When the 747 came to a stop, the passengers began releasing their seatbelts and getting up. Hans wanted to say some-

thing to the Chinese woman. It would be his first attempt at Mandarin on the trip. As silly as it seemed, his heart started pounding as soon as he stood up. Smooth lines and quick wit had never been his strength. But here he was, standing right beside her.

Wearing the traditional collarless jacket with cloth ties up the side, matching dark blue three-quarter length cotton pants, and sandals, the young woman seemed out of place, perhaps a class below the other Asian travelers who wore smart new western fashions. Yet there was something noble in her face. The breadth of her brow. The confidence of her gaze. The tilt of her nose. The soft sensuous expression of her mouth. She reached up to the overhead compartment with her ungloved left hand.

Hans heard himself ask, “May I help you with your bag?” in faltering Mandarin.

She turned to him with cool dark eyes. “I can get it myself,” she said.

For a few tremulous minutes, while the passengers slowly filed out, Hans stood in front of her in the aisle. He wanted to try speaking to her one more time. Fighting his usual diffidence, he turned to her and asked as casually as he could, “Did I hear you say you were going to Wuhan?”

The woman looked at him suspiciously.

“I’m making that connection on China Eastern in Shanghai,” he said with a hopeful smile. “Flight 223.”

“I’m traveling by ship,” she answered with a tone that Hans simply could not decipher in Mandarin. He nodded and fell back into the flow of travelers out of the plane.

Shanghai’s huge international airport was a mess with frantic travelers, security clearances, and luggage checks. Hans deplaned into the mayhem with the young woman just behind him, but she was soon off in another direction to a separate customs line for Chinese nationals.

Hans’ experience with women was modest to say the least. He was definitely not an ogling girl watcher, yet he couldn’t take his eyes off the *xiaojie*—pretty young woman, as she quickly completed her processing and he inched along through his. He followed her with his eyes as she headed out into the mass of travelers. At the last instant, just before she

disappeared into the crowd, she glanced back over her shoulder. Their eyes met!

Then she was gone.

Forty-five minutes later, Hans got his passport stamped, and he rushed off across the bustling airport. With no time to spare, he hurried aboard the China Eastern Airlines 757 to Wuhan, and the close encounter of the first kind slipped to the back of his mind.

As the plane backed out of the gate and taxied to the runway, the high-strung young German fretted through a series of worries, his upcoming dinner engagement with the Chinese officials, living in Asia for a full year, and, lastly, the comments made by the Americans Saturday evening at the Marriott. Later that night he'd used the Internet to revisit some of the old documents on the dam. Many of Harry and Tim's criticisms were there.

Ten minutes out of Shanghai, Hans peered from the airplane window seeking distraction from his angst. Below him fanned the Yangtze delta wetlands. Most of the year they were an extensive estuary system of sloughs and interconnected lakes. Too much of it showed as sandbars and mud flats now. A mild winter's diminished snowpack and the dry spring had cut the river's volume significantly. At twenty thousand feet, the Yangtze estuary was a shrunken string of mustard colored puddles.

The plane's course followed the river southwestward all the way to Wuhan, and Hans' distracted earthward gaze irresistibly directed his thoughts back to questions about the dam. The hydrologist in him analyzed the lowland watershed, picking out the various flood protection diversion areas below—control weirs, ring dikes, floodplain lakes. By the time an increasing haze obscured his view of the land, Hans understood that the answers he sought could only be found upstream at the dam itself.

The 757 touched down in Wuhan's Tianhe Airport just before five that afternoon. Immediately upon deplaning at China Eastern gate four, Hans spotted a large poster board sign with his name printed on it in green felt-tip marker. As Han approached the sign, a small, elderly Chinese gen-

tleman with black-framed glasses, wearing tan dress slacks and a short-sleeved, white silk shirt, peeked around the poster and broke into a wide smile. The man stuck out his hand and spoke in English, albeit broken and heavily accented. “Mr. Fruehauf? Yes? I am Shu Jun from the Three Gorges Project. I am your driver.”

The man had light freckles on ginger skin and was quite thin. As was his hair, which was mostly gray and combed over from the far right to the left. Hans took his hand, answering also in English. “I am glad to meet you, Shu Jun.”

“Call me Shu, Mr. Fruehauf. The dam officials are more formal, but I am simply old Shu.” His eyelids sagged diagonally with a profound kind of dog-eyed sadness that belied the man’s energy and smile. “We should hurry to get your bags,” he said. “Traffic in Wuhan is bad, and I would like to make one stop on way to this evening’s dinner.”

“Whatever you say. And please call me, Hans, Shu.”

“Han, okay.”

“No, Hans—with an *s*.”

Shu smiled. “Yes, Han with an *s*.”

Things were hectic at the baggage claim, but in due time, Hans and Shu were walking through a jam-packed parking lot in sweltering heat to a white late-model VW Jetta with the Three Gorges Project Development Corporation (TGPDC) emblem stenciled in black on the door.

“How thoughtful, Shu,” said Hans, climbing in. “You have come with a nice German car.” Shu smiled slightly, not catching Hans’ attempt at humor, and slid in on the driver’s side.

No sooner were they buckled in and the air-conditioner running than a phone rang inside the car. Shu reached across the car and retrieved a cell phone from the glove compartment. The exchange was a brief series of loud abrupt grunts. Hans understood enough of the one-sided conversation to determine that it was someone from TGPDC verifying that he’d arrived safely.

The first part of the drive was a slow crawl through the heavy Wuhan traffic, a horrific combination of honking cars, rickshaws, jaywalking pedestrians, and literally hundreds of bicyclists weaving wildly in and out at what appeared to Hans tremendous risk of life and limb. When a woman with a child teetering precariously on her rear fender pedaled right into their path, Hans reflexively jammed his right foot to the floor. Shu merely laid on the horn as the woman swerved off into the mad congestion.

Wuhan was plain and dirty by German standards. The majority of the buildings were box-like and unspectacular, all but blending into the dim particulate haze that lay over the city like a vast gray canopy. Except for a billboard showing the progression of China's recent political leaders in profile, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao, and an occasional over-sized sculpture of the working class hero, there was little sign of the hand of communism. The first piece of architecture to catch Hans' eye was a tall pagoda on a hill off to his right as they drove east across town.

"This one stop I would like to make, Han," said Shu, commenting on the traditional Chinese pagoda above them on Snake Hill in the center of Wuhan. "Yellow Crane Tower considered the symbol of our city. From the top, you can get a good view of the Yangtze."

"Sounds good to me, Shu," was Hans' enthusiastic reply.

Another block and Shu took a right into a parking lot at the base of Snake Hill. He parked the car and guided Hans up through a long series of stone stairways and manicured gardens to the crest of the hill and the stunning yellow and red, five-tiered pagoda.

"The original tower was built almost two thousand year ago, but has been destroyed and re-built many time," said Shu as they approached the tower entrance. "This version built only forty year ago and much larger than original."

To Hans' chagrin, Shu denied him any chance to pay the twenty-yuan tourist fee and hurried the young German on into the building. A three-meter high mosaic of a yellow crane decorated the north wall of the ground level. "This the site of a wine shop eighteen century ago," said Shu,

standing before the intricate mosaic, clearly pleased to be showing off his knowledge. "Legend say the shop owner give a poor Taoist priest free glass of wine. As gesture of thanks, the priest drew picture of a crane on the wall and with the clap of his hand make it dance." Shu turned to Hans with an elfin grin. "The shop owner built the first tower in honor of that magic."

Hans followed Shu up eight zig-zagging tiers of stairs to the top of the tower. "Chinese poet for many hundred year come to Yellow Crane Tower for inspiration," said Shu, taking a breath and wiping sweat from his forehead as they attained the top floor. "All find tower so beautiful, immediately write poem to one they love." Shu turned to his German guest with a big smile. "Han, young man like yourself must have wife or girlfriend in Germany?"

Hans actually blushed at the question. "No, Shu. I have spent too many years in school studying with too little time for play. I do find the Yellow Crane Tower very beautiful, but it would be difficult for me to write such a poem. I don't believe I have ever known love other than for my parents and my sister."

"That too bad," said Shu with a mock sadness. "Perhaps you meet woman in China."

"Perhaps," said Hans, avoiding Shu's black eyes as the face of the woman on the plane flashed across his mind.

Shu smiled to himself at the seriousness of the young man. "Chinese women make good wife," he said. "They smart and very strong."

Hans found this topic just a little too personal and turned away to gaze out one of the tower's top floor windows. The view was south over sprawling Wuhan and the confluence of the Han River with the Yangtze.

From this perspective, Hans could see a twenty-mile stretch of the Yangtze's middle reach, drawn to a narrow valley in the hills to the far west, puddled up in shallow basins to the east. The basins all showed wide belts of bare shore. More evidence of the diminished snow pack and long overdue summer rains.

"The Yangtze is an unusual color," said Hans, peering down on the ochre waters from the tower set on a bluff on the river's north bank.

“Much silt,” said Shu, watching the traffic instead of the river. “All river in China that color. Yangtze very low this year. That make it worse.”

Hans stared upstream, thinking once again of the dam and his conversation with the Americans in the lounge atop the Singapore Marriott. *The Three Gorges Dam will silt up before all the minor details are worked out*, one of the Americans had said. He turned to Shu and tried his Mandarin. “This is an impressive view, Shu. Maybe I should write a poem to the *xiaojie* I saw on the plane.”

Shu smiled showing his teeth and responded in Mandarin. “If you write the poem, you will meet the *xiaojie*.”

“Is that an old Chinese saying?”

“No,” said Shu with a wink. “It what Shu say today.”

Shu’s lighthearted manner was just what the tense young German needed, and while driving stop and go along Wuhan’s Louyu Road, Hans made up a whimsical poem in English—he couldn’t make his Mandarin rhyme. He recited it to Shu. “Chinese flower seen one time, forever blossom in my mind, if my new friend Shu is right, I will meet this woman again one night.”

“That very bad poem, Han,” replied Shu in English.

“But is it good enough to work Shu’s magic?” asked Hans with a sincerity that surprised the older man.

“Well,” he said, furrowing his brow with thought. “I am not sure.”

Hans’ face became so serious it made Shu chuckle. “No, I sure now.” His bright eyes sparkled. “Intent more important than quality.”

There was a moment of hesitation before Hans realized in his stark innocence that Shu was teasing him again. Then both men laughed out loud.

Shu parked the Jetta on the street and led Hans several blocks to an open-air restaurant on a corner in downtown Wuhan. They twisted through a maze of tables pouring out onto the sidewalk and entered the restaurant proper. The place was brightly lit, smoky and noisy. Every table was jammed with patrons.

Shu guided Hans to a large round table somewhat segregated from the bustle of the rest of the restaurant. Three men sat at the table with two empty chairs. They rose in unison as Shu and Hans advanced. Two of the men were informally dressed like Shu. Casual short-sleeved silk shirts worn outside polyester slacks. The third wore a gray suit, white shirt, and tie. The tallest of the men stepped forward. Though he was clearly Chinese, there was something western in his face. He extended his hand. "You must be Hans Fruehauf. I am Ye Pen, the Institute Director." He was middle-aged, perhaps forty, had a warm, pleasant smile and spoke English with an English accent. "The Three Gorges Dam Project and the Wuhan Hydrology Institute welcome you to China. We are all pleased to see that you have arrived safely."

Hans took his hand and answered in Mandarin. "Yes, thank you. The pleasure is mine."

Hans' Mandarin, though imperfect and halting, brought an immediate smile to Ye Pen. He turned to the two men standing across the table and introduced them in Mandarin. "This is Nie Zhang. He runs our Ichthyology laboratory." The shorter, younger man extended his hand and smiled easily. His skin was dark by Chinese standards. He had thick black hair and a full mustache. Hans thought he could have passed for a Hispanic.

"And this is Xianfeng Xiao, Senior Engineering Coordinator for the Dam Commission. He is the man who organized this dinner." Xianfeng Xiao wore the suit. He was stocky and the oldest of the three men, maybe fifty-five. He had a round, flat face, thin greasy hair parted to the right, and wire-rimmed glasses. He showed no emotion on being introduced. He merely nodded his head in an abbreviated bow that Hans returned.

After everyone sat down, Ye Pen continued to play host and speak Mandarin. "I hope you don't mind, Mr. Fruehauf." He glanced around at the surrounding area. There were many families with children. A musician played a saxophone beside one table. A woman with a digital camera roamed through the crowd, snapping shots and offering them for sale. "We have brought you to the kind of restaurant we would bring our families. It is less formal, but more authentically the way we are." He smiled.

“And probably the closest thing we have in China to a German beer garden.”

“That’s just as it should be, Ye Pen,” said Hans. Then in an attempt at humor, he asked, “But do they have German sausage?” The Mandarin word he used for sausage meant *stuffed intestine* as in constipated.

“Chinese food will help that,” said Ye Pen, giving his German guest a curious look while waving a waiter over to the table. Ye Pen picked up the menu and turned to the teenage waiter. He pointed out several dishes and asked a few questions in Mandarin. It was all very rapid and Hans did not understand everything Ye Pen said, but his ear was improving by the minute.

When the waiter was gone, Ye Pen turned to Hans. “I have taken the liberty to order for all of us. I have tried to pick out several distinctly Chinese courses. I suspect this is your first meal with Chinese. I want it to be a memorable one.” There was something very continental in Ye Pen, and Hans took a liking to him immediately, just as he had Shu Jun.

“You are correct, Ye Pen,” said Hans, slowly easing into the language. “I have sought out western restaurants my entire trip until now. If I am going to be here for a year, it is time I begin to experience the real China.”

The waiter arrived with five large bottles of Chinese beer and five glasses. He poured the beer, placing a full glass and a half-empty bottle before each of the men. When all were served, Nie Zhang lifted his glass. “To the German in China.”

Hans raised his glass with the others. “To China,” he said with a smile. All returned the toast with enthusiasm, but Xianfeng Xiao. He merely nodded and took a sip from his glass, carefully watching his guest.

Hans got the full treatment of the Chinese’s unmatched hospitality and fondness for food and drink. Plate after plate of Chinese cuisine appeared. Roast duck, sea bass, steamed cabbage, more beer, deep fried tofu, a chicken dish on a bed of rice sprinkled with peanuts, yellow bean tea, more beer, stuffed dumplings. Even using chopsticks for the first time, Hans filled up quickly. He was wondering how to say *no*, when a large covered dish was placed in the center of the table. “Drunken prawn stew,” said old Shu, grinning at Hans and taking great pleasure in lifting the lid.

To the amusement of the Chinese, some of the prawns were still alive and jumped out of the steaming dish onto the table. Nie Zhang snatched one of the little shellfish off the table with his chopsticks and popped it into his mouth alive. This caused a burst of laughter from them all. Nie Zhang pointed a playful finger at Hans, daring the German to eat the prawn flipping helplessly to the left of his plate. Hans flashed a reluctant glance around the table then tried to capture the prawn with his chopsticks. After several failed tweezing attempts chasing it around the table, he pinned the little devil between the sticks. Dramatically raising the prawn from the table, aiming for his mouth, he dropped it into his lap. In utter panic and to the great hilarity of the others, he reached down and pinched the squirming monster between his forefinger and thumb. He lifted it up for all to see, took a sorry look at the half-drunk crustacean, and pushed it into his mouth. He crunched about three times with a horrible grimace, causing the Chinese another burst of laughter, then took his glass of beer and threw down the last of it to wash the bits of meat and soft shell into his stomach. "*Wunderbar!*" he exclaimed, enjoying the challenge and feeling the beer.

When the plates were cleared, and all had eaten too much, Ye Pen called for an aperitif. The waiter brought a small green bottle of rice liquor with a red and white label. Ye Pen filled five small blue enameled ceramic cups and passed them around the table. There was a silent raising of the drinks and all took sips.

Ye Pen watched Hans frown at the sharp taste. He smiled then spoke. "So Mr. Fruehauf, you are here to inspect our giant dam." It was the first time the topic had come up. "You must be excited."

"Yes, of course, Ye Pen," said Hans. "I have seen many pictures of the dam. But I am thrilled to see the dam firsthand." Then thinking of the Americans at the Marriott, he asked, "How is the project going?"

"Very well," said Ye Pen. "There are problems, but that is to be expected in a project this large. More than a million people had to be relocated. This cost more than we expected and is still going on."

“I have read that there could be problems with silt in the Yangtze.” The alcohol had significantly loosened Hans. The questions he’d been thinking about for twenty-four hours now freely percolated out of him.

Nie Zhang, who sat next to him, answered. “Excessive silt is a problem for all dams in China, Mr. Fruehauf, but the Three Gorges Dam has been built with special silt flushing vents at its base. Before long we will know how well they work.”

Ye Pen followed. “The tougher question is if it will control the flooding. There is little doubt the electricity it can provide will be put to good use. But if we can’t control the Yangtze, it will all go for naught.”

Hans was impressed with his hosts’ objective appraisals and pressed on with his questions. “I read a report that suggested several small cofferdams would be better than a single large dam. How does that look now that the reservoir is filled?”

“The reservoir has been full at the 175-meter level most of the time since 2009,” said Ye Pen, “but right now it is not. The Yangtze is running so low this summer, many unexpected complications have arisen. Would a series of cofferdams be better? I am not certain. It was never an option in my time with the project.”

Xianfeng Xiao, sitting next to Nie Zhang, straightened in his chair. He’d hardly said a word all evening and had been moderate in his drinking. “Hans Fruehauf,” he said turning to get Hans’ full attention. “I have been working on the Three Gorges project for almost thirty years.” He spoke slowly and with authority. “There has been much controversy. There always is when you do something on this scale. It is a difficult project both in the actual building of the dam and its overall impact. We displace people. We displace fish and wildlife. We alter the watershed. We gamble with slit buildup. We experiment with concrete. We tempt the terrorist with a huge target.”

Hans felt like he was being lectured.

“All of this we knew in advance,” continued Xianfeng Xiao, intimidating in his sobriety. “But there is a national pride and a politics in this dam that also enters into the calculus of our decisions. China wants to industrialize. We want energy. We want control of the Great River. We want a

deeper shipping channel upriver to Chongqing. These things only come with compromise. Minimize this. Maximize that. That is what engineering at this level really is. A difficult progression of trade-offs.”

“Yes, of course,” replied Hans. He hadn’t meant to attack the dam—it was the Americans in the back of his mind speaking out.

“Regarding cofferdams,” pushed the older man, “it could be that they would offer more control of the river, but they definitely would not create the deep river channel that the Three Gorges reservoir provides. Wei Tincheng, the architect of the dam, stated this very clearly in his first proposal. Cofferdams were never a serious consideration.”

“Yes, yes,” backpedaled Hans, fighting with his Mandarin to find the proper way to save face for all. “But, Xianfeng Xiao, please understand. I do not mean to sound critical. I have never even seen the dam site. I only ask these questions to increase my knowledge. Believe me, I am with you. My bank decided many years ago to invest in this dam. And I am here to make sure that the investment is a success.” He lifted his cup of liquor, catching the eyes of all the others one by one, trying to assure them of his sincerity. “To the dam,” he said with feeling. “To a great success.”

Xianfeng Xiao nodded somberly and lifted his cup while the others repeated Hans’ toast. “Tomorrow, you will see for yourself, Hans Fruehauf,” he said. “I will attend the loan review in August. I will be anxious for your appraisal then.”

C H A P T E R 3

Hans boarded that night at the Hydrology Institute guesthouse. The building dated back to the 1950s, and Hans' room showed none too well for the years. The old air-conditioner in the window rattled and dripped. The wall-to-wall green shag carpet smelled heavily of mildew, and the baseboards were so liberally sprinkled with white roach powder Hans' skin crawled when he slid between the bed sheets.

Hans slept poorly for all the above, plus concerns about his confrontation with Xianfeng Xiao and a toilet that ran all night. He got up early for tea in the dining hall and the welcome surprise of poached eggs and toast. Shu Jun appeared at nine and took him on a walking tour of the institute. They had a pleasant lunch in the cafeteria with Ye Pen at noon and were back in the Jetta by two, headed west on the South China Freeway. The freeway was a new six-lane highway that traced up the outer edges of the Yangtze valley. A 350-kilometer drive would take them to Yichang where Hans would catch a skiff for the final leg of his trip, upriver to Sandouping and the dam itself

Early into the drive, when they were only a few miles outside of Wuhan, Hans asked Shu the question he had been thinking about since first meeting him at the airport the previous day. "Would it be impolite to ask how old you are, Shu?"

Shu looked at Hans, then turned his attention back to the road and smiled. "I am seventy-four." They were both speaking entirely in Mandarin now.

It was many years older than Hans expected. "Then you were born before the People's Revolution?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"Was that a good thing for China?" asked Hans genuinely curious to know how a simple man like Shu would feel about those historic politics.

Shu turned to stare out the side window, watching the landscape for a moment, before looking back to the road and answering. "The old China was very corrupt, Han. The revolution had a cleansing effect on the government and the country. There was a good to it."

Hans sensed a subtle change in the tone of Shu's voice. A seriousness he hadn't felt in him before. "Was that a bad question to ask, Shu? Should I not ask about politics?"

Shu faced Hans and smiled. But it wasn't the same Shu smile. It was a sad smile. "No, it is fine."

For a while neither of them said anything. Then, looking straight ahead, Shu began to talk. "China is different than it was in the time of Chairman Mao, Han. The society is much more open. We can talk about almost anything. But those who are as old as I am have seen many changes and experienced some very hard times. We are more cautious than the younger people."

Hans thought of the horrible famine that he'd read about in the newspaper. "What did you do when you were younger, Shu? Did you live in the country?"

Again Shu was slow in answering. "No, I lived in Beijing. I was a history professor at Tsinghau University."

Hans recognized this as one of the most esteemed universities in China. "You were a professor at Tsinghau?" All along Hans had assumed Shu was an uneducated older man who had been fortunate enough in his later years to get a job as a driver for TGPDC.

"Yes, when I was about your age."

"And something happened?"

“You are familiar with the Cultural Revolution?”

“Yes, to some degree,” said Hans. Mostly he’d studied ancient China.

Shu nodded. “I was a progressive intellectual at a time when Chairman Mao became afraid of academics. He decided that it was important for the intellectuals to know the working class experience. He feared that academics were leaning too far to the right. He felt we needed to be rehabilitated from our lofty ideas.”

“And what happened?”

“My job at the university was taken away,” said Shu. “I was transferred from Beijing to Zigong in the Sichuan Province to work in the salt wells.”

“For how long?”

“Twenty-five years.”

Hans’ face went blank. “Were you ever able to return to the university?”

“No,” said Shu softly.

“I’m sorry, Shu.” Hans didn’t know what else to say.

Shu smiled. “No need for that. It happened to quite a few of us, and it was many years ago. Fortunately things are gradually changing for the better now.”

Hans wanted to ask him if he were a communist, but he held off and thought back through his twenty-four hours with the elderly man. He realized Shu was a vastly more subtle person than he’d first imagined. He recalled how gently Shu had humored him when he’d recited his silly poem. It impressed Hans.

“Shu, how long would it take to travel by boat from Shanghai to Wuhan?”

“I am not sure, Han,” replied Shu. “Perhaps three days, maybe five. Maybe longer depending on the kind of vessel.”

“I see,” said Hans, clearly running through something in his head.

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason.”

Shu nodded, looking straight ahead at the road. “You ask for no reason?”

“I was just wondering.”

Several minutes passed and Hans again addressed Shu. "Remember the woman I mentioned yesterday?"

"The woman of the poem," said Shu turning to look at Hans, who was gazing out his side window.

"Yes. She said she was traveling from Shanghai to Wuhan by boat." He turned to Shu. "Does that make any sense?"

"It seems a bit odd," said Shu.

"Why?" asked Hans with a lift of emotion.

"No reason," said Shu staring straight ahead.

"Shu, why?"

Shu continued to stare straight ahead, but a wide smile crept over his face. And Hans started to laugh. "Okay. I'm trying to figure out what chance there is that I would see the *xiaojie* again."

"In a country of over a billion people?" Shu paused as though going through the numbers. "I'd say a chance of one."

Even in Mandarin, Hans knew he was being teased again. "Because I made up that poem, and you said it would happen."

"*Dui.*" Correct.

Little by little, the strain of traveling began to catch up with Hans, and his conversation with Shu lapsed. He spent most of the next few hours staring out the car window, thinking about his family and observing the countryside which was so different from what he knew in Germany, particularly as it transitioned into farmland.

Incredibly, water buffalo were more common than tractors or combines. The trucks Hans saw were old and battered. Many simply rusting in the weeds. The farmers worked almost entirely by hand, wading barefoot in the rice paddies in three-quarter length pants, planting rice shoots one at a time from woven baskets, and wearing the ever-present conical straw headgear. Those walking between the fields on the dusty dirt roads either carried their loads balanced across their backs on yokes or pushed rough wooden carts. In two words, it was primitive and austere.

Even the manner in which the farmland was managed seemed unusual to the young German. The large communal farms had been cut up into

small pieces many years ago. Each family was given one of these portions of land to manage by themselves. Instead of wide expanses of a single crop, as you would see along the road in Germany, fields were sectioned into a patchwork of small rectangular plots or long strips. And each plot contained the entire variety of vegetables or fruits grown in that area.

Absolutely every square inch of land was planted. Little odd shaped patches of corn or potatoes were squeezed in anywhere space allowed. Ponds for aqua-culture or water chestnuts or irrigation dotted the farmland. Whenever possible, the gardens were terraced to maximize the topography. Chickens and goats wandered freely through the fields, periodically adding to the fertilization of the soil. Except for the freeway and the passing cars, it could well have been the twelfth century for the simplicity of the country and the look of the people on the land.

Towns along the highway were few and far between. Homes appeared in clusters, made of brick and stone with roofs of tile or corrugated tin. Often the windows did not have glass or were simply boarded shut. Electric lines ran as rare as spun gold—seldom more than a single thread in this vast blanket of land that time forgot. Yet, every now and then, Hans would spot a satellite dish peeking out from behind a house or beside a barn, yawning upward like a giant inverted toadstool, calling hopefully to the future.

But even more than the severity of the life, the dire weight of Asia's warm winter and dry summer lay heavily over everything Hans saw. The crops were not robust and green. The irrigation ponds were low or dry. He had studied the entire extent of the Yangtze drainage field fingers, and he imagined the downstream effects of the diminished snowpack as a giant hand pressing hard on this cherished stretch of China's farmland. He couldn't help but wonder what part the addition of the dam played in this year's floodplain drama.

After two hours with barely a twist or a turn, the highway began to angle back toward the river. The flat open cropland became rolling hills with shrubbery and trees. The Jetta came up over a rise then dipped into the Yangtze valley and wound into the outskirts of Yichang. It was as

though they had entered another country or had gone through a time warp. Huge billboards appeared in the hills along the freeway. There was the ever-present four generations of Communist Party leaders in profile. Another was a leftover from the 2008 Olympics, scenes of athletic events, stadiums, and the multicolored rings. Then on the eastern edge of Yichang, just as the Yangtze came into view at the bottom of the valley, was the largest billboard Hans had seen yet, an artist's rendering of the completed complex at the Three Gorges Dam, pictured with beautiful green hills swelling up around a vast blue reservoir. It looked like a theme park and reminded Hans of smaller versions of this same image he'd seen in the H-B offices in Germany. God, he thought to himself, I hope it will look so good.

Soon they were rolling down a long incline, off a ramp, through a toll-booth, and into the city of Yichang proper. New buildings staged across the skyline. Up in the hills were large beautiful homes in all states of construction. Yichang appeared to be a brand new city in the making. Like a huge sum of money had suddenly spilled out of the sky and prompted city-wide renovation.

A circular park marked the heart of Yichang's new shopping district. The lawn in the center was fresh and green. The sidewalk was bright white. Around the perimeter were four brushed stainless steel abstract sculptures glistening like shiny coins. The numerous pedestrians wore western fashions and were mirrored by the things in the windows of the shops and department stores. There was a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant, a Taco Bell, and McDonald's golden arches. After gray Wuhan and vast, over-crowded international Shanghai, Yichang was the brightly colored new image of China. Modern architecture with hints of the traditional. Horned roofs. Decorative columns. Ornamental dragons and strategically placed foo dogs. But more than that, it was the sense of wealth that stood out against the impact of the summer drought so evident in the farmland.

The city dazzled Hans all the way to the last block before the river. Then suddenly things got dirty, gray, and decrepit. Shu eased the Jetta down to the docks on narrow broken pavement and came to a stop on a

concrete apron. A thick foul smell hit Hans as soon as he got out of the air-conditioned car, and instinctively he began looking around for the source—a dead dog or garbage going rancid in the summer heat—until he realized it was the river itself.

Shu walked around to the rear of the Jetta. He opened the trunk then pointed down to the river. A long makeshift plank walkway ran from the apron across the shrunken river's muddy shoreline to a rough looking, rust red construction skiff at the edge of the water. A man on the bow waved to Shu and Shu waved back.

"That is your boat, Han," said Shu, taking out both of Hans' bags—in spite of Hans' protests—and leading him to the first in the series of narrow planks down to the river.

The river was very low and sluggish, maybe two kilometers across here in Yichang. The closer they got to the water the stronger the smell of sewage. Pieces of styrofoam, old clothing, rubber boots, plastic wrappers, orange peels, and festering fish littered the wide mud shoreline. The plank walkway had no railing, was wobbly and slick. The last four meters were over the opaque ochre waters. Hans was disgusted by the garbage and the smell, but was more concerned about a fall into the great dirty river. *What dysentery would come from that?* Then he was at the launch, the pilot helping him on board and his second taking the bags from Shu.

The twenty-five foot boat was a simple flat, aluminum hull, slightly lifted out of the water at the prow, probably drafting less than a foot at speed. The cramped helm was set at the aft of the vessel with a half-sheet of corrugated tin mounted over top as a roof. Stretched canvas covered the rest of the boat forward, but it was only high enough to squat under or store bags.

Hans shook Shu's hand across the gunwale and, with a welling of emotion, thanked him for the wonderful hospitality and kindness. "You will find your *xiaojie*," said Shu with a wink.

"Not likely," replied Hans.

"Han," said Shu smiling. "There are many beautiful women in China. Not just one. Trust me in that."

“Yes, I know you are right,” replied the young German, truly touched by this man he had known barely one day. “Will I see you again, Shu?” he called out as the pilot fired up the balky outboard.

“Perhaps, Han, I make the drive to the dam several times a month.”

“I’ll look for you,” shouted Hans as the little skiff putted out into the main channel of the Yangtze.

The skiff pilot was a wild looking, yellow-skinned young man. His black hair stuck straight up from a soiled white bandana wrapped around his head. A cigarette dangled jauntily from his lips, and a long upraised scar rippled through his left eyebrow down to the top of his cheek. With a slashing lopsided, black-toothed grin, he motioned to Hans to stand alongside him beneath the corrugated roof, while the deckhand knelt at the bow.

The sheet of tin rattling counterpoint to the engine’s throb prevented much talk or description of the river by the pilot, but the view up the lower end of the Three Gorges made for the perfect approach to the dam and needed little verbal embellishment. That was the whole reason for this portion of the trip. Shu could have driven Hans all the way to Sandouping, but Hans’ contact at the dam site, a government administrator by the name of Che Gong-yi, had suggested Hans see the dam for the first time from the downstream side of the river. It was just a shame the water was so low and foul.

The launch skipped along quite quickly. The forty-kilometer trip took less than two hours, including going through the lock at the Gezhou Dam, a smaller hydroelectric dam built in the 1960s, the first to harness the Yangtze. Its reservoir had sunk so low with the lack of water flow that the lock was but a narrow channel with no need for its hydraulic lifts.

The air was cooler upriver, and toward dusk a light mist began to fall. Moving rapidly over the river, it was a refreshing break from the urban heat. Hans forgot the smell and the river pollution and discovered how excited he really was to see the dam. The terrain and little towns along the river came alive for him, as little by little, from the airplane, from the Yel-

low Crane Tower, now on the Yangtze itself, he was acquainting himself with the Great River.

The last portion of the trip was through the lower end of the Xiling Gorge. It was the first of the three gorges identified in the name of the dam and stretched upriver fifteen kilometers past the construction site. The river was less than fifty meters across at some places in the gorge, and the sheer, fluted palisades, orange limestone streaked with black, towered dizzyingly three, four, five hundred meters straight up above the tiny boat.

Gradually the river widened to several kilometers. And the Palisades slid back into the distance. The north bank of the river flattened and became the eastern edge of the city of Sandouping, another boomtown, new and colorful like Yichang, that had sprouted up with the construction of the gigantic dam.

The pilot touched Hans on the arm and pointed off to the hills behind the city. "There is the quarry," he said in Mandarin over the motor's clatter. "Opened with one intent—to cut rock for the dam."

Hans nodded with building anticipation. The huge chasm cut from the hillside meant the dam was near. His eyes turned upriver anxiously. Just ahead Sandouping's Xiling Bridge suspended over the river on orange cables, a man-made rainbow, brilliant even in the settling dusk. As they passed beneath the bridge, Hans leaned out from beneath the tin roof to stare upward into its substructure a hundred meters overhead.

The pilot bit a smile into his smoldering cigarette and motioned upstream. Nine, ten, eleven huge cranes silhouetted out of the river mist like a herd of brontosaurus. Then gradually, the great beast itself, 27,000,000 cubic meters of concrete, 180 meters in height, resolved out of the haze. And Hans' heart began to pound.

This was it. The largest construction site in the history of the world. The most ambitious engineering effort in China since the Great Wall. For all the negatives Hans had heard at the Marriott, being there beneath the giant dam, drawing up to the twin five-step locks, the actual experience of it was overwhelming. He swelled with pride to be part of such an epic undertaking.

They approached the back of the dam midway between the rushing spillways in the center of the dam and the locks on the north bank. When they got close, the thundering crash of water drowned out the outboard rattle and everything else. What could be more thrilling to a young hydrologist just out of school? The largest hydroelectric dam in the world! All fresh and new! Hans' mouth fell open with awe at the staggering sight.

The pilot waved at his mate and pointed toward the dam. The mate pulled a cell phone from his pocket and punched at it with his forefinger. Hans couldn't hear, but he understood they were calling ahead to Che Gong-yi.

At the level of the river, between the locks and the spillways, there was a landscaped park for the dam employees. The helmsman bumped the launch up against a small landing at the edge of this park. The deckhand leapt onto the landing with a rope and wrapped it around a stanchion. Hans stepped from the skiff just as a short, stocky Chinese man with an open round face came bobbing down the walkway. He wore thick, black-rimmed glasses, the ever-present short-sleeved, squared-bottom silk shirt, and khaki cargo pants. His black hair was just long enough in the front to push off to the right, while the rest was a half-inch of bristle. He broke into a wide toothy smile as he approached. "You must be Hans Fruehauf." He spoke in English and stuck out his hand. "I am Che Gong-yi. It is my job to make you comfortable in the city of Sandouping." He continued to smile like an old friend.

Hans shook Che Gong-yi's hand. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Che Gong-yi," he answered in Mandarin. "Quite an impressive sight you have here. This dam is absolutely stunning."

Hans' Mandarin clearly pleased Che Gong-yi, and his wide smile blinked up another level. The skiff pilot placed Hans' baggage on the landing, bowed to Che Gong-yi, and returned to his boat.

Che Gong-yi took both bags. "Tonight," he said, leading Hans across the little park to a set of double doors at the base of the dam, "I will take you to your residence. Tomorrow, in the light of day, you will be given a tour of the dam site."

They entered the doors into a small foyer with an elevator. They took the elevator up sixty floors to the top of the dam, walked down a long yellow-tiled corridor, and out into the north side parking lot to Che Gong-yi's car—another TGPDC-issue white Jetta. Che Gong-yi put the luggage in the trunk, and they drove off.

Very close by, less than two miles into the low hills north of the dam, was the Three Gorges Dam Reception Center. Che Gong-yi pulled the Jetta up in front of the lobby.

“This is where you will stay during your year here, Mr. Fruehauf.”

Hans climbed from the car and stared in absolute amazement at the immaculate white stucco, four-star hotel. The twenty-six floor building was set into the hills in split-levels with huge plate glass windows all across the front. This, thought Hans, was surely not the Wuhan Hydrology Institute guesthouse.

Taking both bags, Che Gong-yi led Hans into the two-story lobby. The floor was gray marble. Above, wide bands of blue and white striped cloth draped across the ceiling. A balcony ran around the second floor with an inlaid mahogany railing. This wasn't first-class. It was luxury class.

Che Gong-yi introduced Hans to the receptionist and received two plastic, door cards. They entered an elevator and ascended to the twentieth floor of the five hundred-room reception center. Three doors down the hall on the left was room 2005. Che Gong-yi put the card into the lock and pushed open the door to a sparkling three-room executive suite. Hans followed his host in.

To the right was a kitchenette.

“There is western food in the cupboards and refrigerator,” said Che Gong-yi, opening a cabinet door, revealing its full shelves. “There on the desk,” he pointed across the living room, “are the latest technical papers for the dam. Here,” he lifted a few brochures off the kitchen table, “are maps and tourist information for Sandouping.”

Hans walked through the apartment. The living room contained cable television and an online computer. The bedroom had a king-size bed. Hans sat on the bed then bounced up to poke his head into the adjoining

western style bathroom. It had a Jacuzzi. "This is incredible, Che Gong-yi, thank you." His smile matched his host's.

"There are three restaurants downstairs. Cantonese, Sichuan, and western. There's a workout room, a bowling alley, billiards tables, and a coffee lounge." Che Gong-yi lifted the receiver from the phone on the kitchen wall. "If you need anything, call. Press eight to get an outside line. Here is my card." He handed Hans a business card with phone number and e-mail address. "I know you have traveled a long way and may like some time to yourself." It was already past nine. "I will leave you now and be back in the morning at eight-thirty to introduce you to the dam's head engineer, Li Lin."

Hans shook hands with his host again, took the room cards, and said good-bye.

The place was more than Hans could have hoped for—and a welcome relief from the previous night's lodgings. He dropped onto the wide, soft sofa and closed his eyes. It had been a long five days since Berlin, and he was glad to have his own space and some time alone. In ten minutes, he was sound asleep.